Renaming and Rebranding within U.S. and Canadian Geography Departments, 1990–2014

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Renaming and Rebranding within U.S. and Canadian Geography Departments, 1990–2014

Amy E. Frazier and Thomas A. Wikle
Oklahoma State University

Between 2000 and 2014, more than thirty geography departments adopted revised or new names, with some entirely dropping geography. Although renaming and rebranding efforts are not new to higher education, the rapid pace at which geography department names have changed raises questions about the discipline’s identity and health. We examine the renaming trend within geography programs with together with intended and unexpected factors as perceived by faculty. Specifically, we look at the renaming and rebranding trend within the context of four pillars offered by Pattison (1964) to define geography’s principal academic domains—earth-science, man–land, area/regional studies, and spatial traditions. Key Words: academic unit, administration, AAG, program, survey.

2000 年至 2014 年间，三十所以上的地理系采用了修正或崭新的系名，有些甚至完全去除地理一词。尽管再命名或品牌重塑的尝试，对高等教育而言并不陌生，但地理系名称的快速变迁，引发了有关该领域的认同与健康状态的疑问。我们检视地理学程的再命名潮流，以及教职员所认为的预期或非预期因素。我们特别检视派特森 (Pattison 1964) 所提出的四大支柱脉络中的再命名与品牌重塑潮流，以定义地理学的首要学术领域——地球科学，人类——土地，地区/区域研究，以及空间传统。关键词: 学术单位, 政治, 北美地理学家学会, 学程, 调研。

I’m not my name. My name is something I wear, like a shirt. It gets worn. I outgrow it, I change it.
—Jerry Spinelli (2004, 62)

Despite funding cuts and calls for greater accountability, the internal structure of higher education has witnessed few substantive changes over the last fifty years. Within a majority of colleges and universities, the department has retained its preeminent status as the focus of academic life and the basic administrative unit for hiring and evaluating faculty, teaching courses, and overseeing curricula. Departments are a home for academic life, offering physical space for instruction, student advising, research, and other activities. Along with their role in budgeting and personnel matters, departments serve as units for internal and external comparisons of scholarship, extramural funding, student retention, graduation rates, and other measures of productivity. Perhaps most important, departments serve as socially constructed places for creative interaction and exploration among like-minded students and faculty. As a symbol of its function and mission, a department’s name represents its subject-area focus within an institution, to a wider community of scholars, and to the public at large.

What’s in a Name?

In an April 2014 AAG Newsletter column, American Association of Geographers (AAG) President Judith Winkler noted a recent trend whereby many academic geography departments had taken steps to change their names, a phenomenon she called “rebranding” (Winkler 2014). Along with speculating on factors underlying the trend, Winkler observed an increase in the rate at which rebranding was taking place. Indeed, since 2000 more than thirty U.S. and Canadian departments of geography have changed their name, sometimes through mergers involving other academic units. In other cases, geography departments have broken away from larger conglomerate units or adopted names allied with an emerging research specialization or teaching emphasis.

Changes within higher education are often driven by budget challenges or pressure to implement efficiencies. Although administrative factors explain some
efforts to rename, much of the impetus for renaming and rebranding in recent years appears to be coming from within geography departments, raising other questions. For example, has the renaming and rebranding trend in geography affected mostly large public universities, or has it also been felt across small institutions? What forms of renaming and rebranding have been implemented, and what motivations underlie renaming and rebranding efforts? Do name changes reflect an expanded mission (i.e., “geography and sustainability”) or other goals such as addressing low enrollment, shifting student interests, or the desire to project a fresh identity or realign with a new academic emphasis? Along with other more general questions, renaming and rebranding raises important issues for geography and geographers. For example, is change driven by a perception that geography is an “old-fashioned” name amidst increasing student interest in programs emphasizing the environment, sustainability, or other emerging areas? Does the trend toward realignment reflect increasing faculty research or teaching specialization? Are some name changes acts of desperation by departments hoping to survive in the face of declining student enrollment or budget challenges? Winkler’s remarks raise important questions about the rationale underlying renaming and rebranding and what, if anything, can be done to strengthen geography’s identity.

In this article, we explore rebranding in U.S. and Canadian geography departments with a focus on both the types of departments that have rebranded and how senior faculty perceive the benefits and consequences associated with their department’s name change. To provide context for our analysis and discussion, we begin by looking at the origins of academic departments and provide an overview of geography’s emergence within higher education and subsequent struggles on college and university campuses. We then consider renaming and rebranding within academic departments through a review of the extant literature examining efforts to rename and rebrand, with consideration of the broader implications of rebranding on geography’s identity and survival. Within this context, we explore rebranding through a survey administered to department chairs and heads and senior faculty in departments identified as having undergone renaming and rebranding in the past twenty-five years. The results are presented and discussed within the context of Pattison’s (1964) core knowledge areas of geography.

The Origin of the Academic Department

Emerging on college and university campuses in the United States and Canada in the later part of the nineteenth century, the academic department is a relatively recent organizational construct (Edwards 1999). Early departments in North American colleges and universities can be traced to the German model of formal graduate departments with distinct disciplinary boundaries that became popular in Europe during the 1800s (Dressel and Reichard 1970). During this same period, many U.S. colleges and universities began replacing their singular, common curriculum with greater breadth in course offerings. Along with serving the demand for more course work and new degrees, departments organized along disciplinary lines offered an administrative home for newly hired faculty while helping them improve their national and international visibility and identity (Gottlieb 1961; Winteler 1981; Clark 1987; Becher 1989; Mills et al. 2005). As colleges and universities became more research oriented, the department structure became useful for enhancing faculty prestige as productivity and accomplishments were evaluated. Increasingly, faculty sought to be affiliated with departments that were rising in their national reputation as a result of success with publications, extramural funding, and the placement of graduates (Fogarty and Saftner 1993; Keith 1999; Liu and Zhan 2012; Coomes et al. 2013). As departments grew in size, faculty gained autonomy, the ability to lobby for resources, and, often, the capability to influence decision making at higher levels.

A distinction should be made between scholarly disciplines and academic departments. Whereas disciplines are generally defined as distinct fields of study associated with academic majors and degrees, academic departments are functional constructs that often administer numerous programs (e.g., majors, minors, certificates, etc.; Dickeson 1999). Departments could be associated with a single discipline and degree program or could serve as a home for two or more disciplines and all associated programs (i.e., a department of geography and geology that grants degrees in geography, earth science, and sustainability). Although a department might be interdisciplinary (e.g., history and geography), disciplines are rarely split across departments.

Within disciplines, specialization can lead to allegiance with a subdiscipline or a strong affinity with colleagues working in a related discipline. For example, geographers trained in geomorphology often maintain closer ties to scholars working in geology programs than to geography colleagues. Over time, the general trend across many campuses has been to add programs to attract students, nurture faculty specialties, and build prestige. Adding programs, however, often results in the diminution of resources because programs are rarely deleted (Dickeson 1999). In an effort to be efficient, departmental reorganizations (e.g., mergers) are sometimes implemented with resources reallocated to make more efficient use of staff, less office space, and so on.

Formal geography departments were established on U.S. college and university campuses toward the end of the 1800s. Although experiencing a period of sustained growth after 1900, many geography programs suffered a setback when U.S. colleges and universities began separating physical and social sciences course
work and degree programs (Koelsch 2001). Other challenges began after World War II, when geography programs were eliminated at leading U.S. institutions such as Harvard (1948), Stanford (1964), and Yale (1967). As Smith (1987) noted, efforts to shut down Harvard’s geography department followed a decision to split geology and geography into separate departments.

Geography’s troubles continued during the 1970s with financial issues cited in the closure of thirty additional programs (Fink 1979; Dorschner and Marten 1990). Among victims were smaller departments located at large public institutions such as the University of Michigan. Despite having a strong national ranking, Michigan’s program experienced declining enrollment and its small faculty struggled to gain support for preventing its closure in 1981 (Haigh and Freeman 1982). Geography suffered additional losses throughout the 1980s, including departments at the University of Pittsburgh (1983), University of Chicago (1986), and Northwestern University (1987). Although less regular, closures continue today, most recently with the elimination of the geography department at the University of New Orleans (2013). Campus officials sometimes characterize department closures as “vertical cuts” because impacts are concentrated within a single program in lieu of being absorbed across multiple units (Wilson 2009), and from a program prioritization standpoint, it might make economic sense to prioritize programs and redistribute resources from the weakest to the stronger programs (Dickeson 1999).

Today, larger universities often have sufficient resources for stand-alone geography departments, but smaller colleges might offer a geography program within an academic unit that contains other disciplines such as history, economics, or political science. Such composite departments might contribute to disagreements where allegiance along disciplinary lines leads to conflict over resources, hiring, tenure and promotion, or curriculum decisions (see Smith 1987). In some ways, the interdisciplinary nature of geography contributes to confusion by affecting how geographers perceive themselves and who they interact with most. North American departments of geography are presently found in the largest numbers among public comprehensive universities offering master’s and doctoral degree programs (AAG 2014). In comparison, geography departments are not well represented at many private institutions. As noted by Bjelland (2004), they are missing at more than 90 percent of U.S. liberal arts colleges and universities. Among the eight Ivy League schools, geography is currently found only at Dartmouth College (Wright and Koch 2009).

Despite their importance in providing structure for a college or university’s academic mission, the organization and function of academic departments has not been without criticism. Departments have been characterized as “organized anarchies” (Cohen and March 1974) or described as autocracies, oligarchies, and bureaucracies (Smart and Elton 1975). According to Hutchins (1967), an academic department exists, “like every other subhuman organism, for the survival, reproduction, and expansion of itself” (16). Edwards (1999) noted that the departmental system has remained mostly unaffected by reforms that have sought to change public research universities. Some have suggested alternatives to departments such as interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary approaches to teaching and research (Capaldi 2009) or have recommended restructuring in ways that foster more intra-departmental interaction (Wergin 1994), but these types of organizational structures are rare on college campuses.

### Rebranding in Academe

Decisions to rename programs in higher education are shaped by a diverse range of factors, often including input from stakeholder groups such as students, faculty, legislators, alumni, and donors. At higher levels within an institution, the decision to rename and rebrand might be tied to a mission change. For example, when the Territorial Normal School at Tempe became Arizona State University in 1958, the institution’s focus on teacher preparation was replaced by a comprehensive state-wide mission. College and department rebranding can also be driven by changing goals or pursuits. For example, a realignment of teaching or research priorities might be tied to new or changing student interest or emerging research areas. In other cases, administrative objectives or changes in institutional support can lead to restructuring (Crouse, Colgate, and Gaudet 2007). Along with reflecting disciplinary changes, a name change might be perceived as offering benefits such as increased enrollment, expanded institutional support, or improved success in attracting high-caliber faculty (Mallon, Biebuyck, and Jones 2003; Bunton 2006).

Name changes can also be driven by trends within academic disciplines. For example, within U.S. colleges and universities, academic units emphasizing evolutionary ecology and microbiology have evolved alongside, or replaced, biology departments with names such as “biology and evolutionary ecology” or “integrative biology.” As noted by Gumport and Snydman (2002), rather than remove portions of department names, which might signal the delegitimation of knowledge, many departments have lengthened names to address larger changes within a discipline. In lieu of appearing and disappearing, departments evolve by changing names, merging, or splitting (Gumport 1993), and modification to department names is an example of how departments adapt within the bureaucratic structure of universities (Edwards 1999). Along with internal forces, renaming and rebranding might be driven by external factors such as evolving workforce
needs. For example, many academic journalism programs have implemented significant changes as most Americans now receive news through digital rather than print sources. Journalism programs have responded by realigning curricula to emphasize mass media and strategic communication with long-standing department names such as “journalism” increasingly being replaced by newer labels such as “media and strategic communications.”

Departmental name changes might also be driven by economic factors. Recessions and economic crises result in fewer resources available to administer programs, often leading to programmatic review (Griffith 1993) and prioritization (Dickeson 1999) to make budget cuts. Geography departments might be particularly vulnerable to economic downturns as a result of a few factors. First, geography departments in the United States and Canada are often small (ten to twenty faculty) and often administer numerous programs (e.g., several undergraduate majors, minors, geographic information system [GIS] certificates, graduate degrees, etc.). Because these programs are often perceived as requiring substantial resources, administrators sometimes turn to mergers as a cost-saving solution during recessions. Second, geography’s interdisciplinary nature means that departments contain diverse faculty. If several faculty from a similar sub-discipline (e.g., cultural geography) retire from a small department and lines are not replaced due to an economic situation (e.g., hiring freeze), the tenor of the department might shift, prompting a name change or rebranding effort.

Geography’s Identity and Survival

Although enjoying a long history on college and university campuses, geography’s health and survival have been a frequent topic of concern. Several factors have been suggested for explaining the discipline’s struggles, including an identity crisis attributed to periodic shifts in emphasis (Haigh and Freeman 1982). In the early 1960s, Pattison (1964) attempted to solidify geography’s mission by defining its four principal traditions: earth-science, man–land, area/regional studies, and spatial traditions. These focus areas have endured across decades and continue to form the basis from which progressions in geographic knowledge and education are often measured (e.g., Robinson 1976; Goodchild and Janelle 1988; Bednarz 2000; Bennetts 2005). Although useful for external representations, Pattison’s pillars might be less helpful for capturing geography’s breadth. In addition, geography’s diverse subfields are constantly dilating to encompass peripheral subject areas such as sustainability, resilience, and planning, to name a few. As noted by Clifford (2002), the increasing breadth and diversity of geographic subject matter paints a bleak future for geography and its quest for identity. In addition, the academic distance among the discipline’s core traditions has been at the root of factionalism among faculty members and harmful to efforts aimed at cementing a positive external image of the discipline (Koelsch 2001).

Dawson and Hebden (1984) made the prophetic observation that “the public face of geography is of concern for its long-term survival” (254), noting also that geography’s image “is not strong” in the eyes of either the general public or policymakers. These statements were echoed by de Blij (2005), who noted that outside the discipline there remains an ignorance about what geography is and what geographers do. The implication is that student recruitment, extramural funding, and, ultimately, internal support are tied to geography’s public image.

Recognizing the discipline’s vulnerability, prominent geographers have suggested that the discipline’s identity and survival depend, in part, on its inter-disciplinary links (Wilbanks and Libbey 1979), visibility relative to other campus programs (Koelsch 2001), and flexibility (Erickson 2012). By aligning itself with emerging bodies of knowledge, geography can potentially use its flexibility and interdisciplinary connections to expand its prominence and improve its public image. For instance, geography has successfully partnered with geology programs, creating larger units that might be perceived as less susceptible to budget cuts. In looking at such administrative changes, Bierly and Gatrell (2004) found that between 1991 and 2001, geography frequently merged with geology and earth science, environmental sciences, geosciences, and planning programs. Similarly, Battles and Welford (2000) looked at combined geography and geology departments, noting benefits such as resource sharing and cooperation involving curriculum.

Objective and Methods

Given the recent flurry of name changes within geography departments, we explore the renaming and rebranding phenomenon. We seek to identify the types of departments that have rebranded, the rationale behind name changes, and the perceived benefits and unintended consequences associated with rebranding. More specifically, our inquiry looks at the following questions: (1) Are rebranding efforts tied to geography’s core areas as identified by Pattison (1964) as earth-science, man–land, area/regional studies, and spatial traditions, or are they reflective of an effort to maintain or broaden geography’s place within a body of knowledge? (2) What is the principal force driving efforts to implement name changes? Are most changes implemented to attract additional majors, graduate students, or faculty or for altogether different reasons? Along with the importance tied to a department’s name, Gumport and Snyder (2002) argued that academic boundaries are also established through programmatic offerings, such as degrees conferred.
Therefore, we also examine the creation of new degree programs that accompanied name changes.

Using the Guide to Geography Programs in the Americas: 2014–2015 (AAG 2014), we created a database of all current geography programs offering baccalaureate or higher degrees at institutions in the United States and Canada. We then cross-checked departmental names against the Guide to Programs dating back to 1990 to identify units that had experienced a name change over that time period. All types of name changes were evaluated, including those resulting from unit mergers, splits, subject additions, and subject deletions. Subsequently, we used Web sites and other published information to identify department chairs and heads, and contacted each with a brief explanation of our project along with a survey Web link containing both general questions about the department’s name change and more detailed queries regarding the rationale and consequences of the change (Table 1). If a chair or head was not aware of events surrounding the name change, we suggested the survey be forwarded to a senior faculty member more familiar with those events. Survey responses were compiled in a database and basic statistical analyses were carried out on the data.

Results

According to the Guide to Geography Programs in the Americas: 2014–2015 (AAG 2014), there are 428 geography programs at four-year colleges across the United States and Canada. From this master list, we successfully identified and contacted eighty-nine departments or programs (about 21 percent) that had undergone a name change between 1990 and 2014. We received forty-seven responses, yielding a response rate of 53 percent. Respondents represent a range of institution types with seven (15 percent) from departments granting bachelor’s degrees only, twenty-three (49 percent) from master’s-granting departments, and seventeen (36 percent) from doctoral departments. For the purpose of comparison, these rates can be compared to Carnegie classifications for 580 geography departments and programs in the United States and Canada (AAG 2014) with fifty-eight (9.0 percent) programs or departments offering the baccalaureate only, 174 (48.0 percent) programs or departments offering the master’s degree, and 150 programs or departments (41.9 percent) offering doctoral degrees. We use supplemental information collected about all eighty-nine departments as well as the specific responses from the forty-seven participants within different portions of the analysis (Table 2).

Information gathered on all eighty-nine departments enabled us to plot common trajectories for name changes (Figure 1). The most frequent change for departments originally called geography or some other name (e.g., history and geography) involved the addition of environment or similar derivatives. Twenty departments changed their name from “geography” to “geography and environmental studies,” “geography and environmental science,” or a related name. Although Canadian institutions make up only a small proportion of the eighty-nine programs (seven; <8 percent), they overwhelmingly fall into this category. Five Canadian departments became “geography and environmental studies” (or similar), and two became “geography and earth sciences.” A second common change included mergers among geography and geology programs (n = 10), with names most often changing from “geography” to either to “geography and geology” or “geosciences.” New names emphasizing a realignment with science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) were also popular (n = 10) as exemplified through a shift from “geography” to science-focused names such as “geographical sciences.”

Table 1  Example survey questions sent to department chairs and heads of geography departments identified as having undergone a name change between 1990 and 2014

| Q1. | What is the current name of your department? |
| Q2. | What was the previous name of your department? |
| Q3. | What year did your department name take effect? |
| Q4. | What degree levels does your department offer? |
| Q5. | Please indicate the reason(s) why your department changed its name (several options provided including option to write in responses). |
| Q6/7. | Were any new undergraduate or graduate degree programs created just prior to or following the department’s name change? If so, what were the level(s) and name(s) of these degrees? |
| Q8. | How has the name change positively or negatively impacted your DEPARTMENT in the following areas (choices provided for 15 areas)? |
| Q9. | How has the name change positively or negatively impacted GEOGRAPHY in the following areas (choices provided for same 15 areas as above)? |
| Q10. | How many permanent, full-time faculty in your department earned their highest degree in geography? |

Table 2  Data sets used in the analysis and corresponding result tables and figures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data set</th>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Results</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>89 departments identified as undergoing name change between 1990 and 2014</td>
<td>Cross-comparison of AAG Guide to Programs and supplemental Internet research</td>
<td>Figures 1, 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Survey responses from 47 participants</td>
<td>Survey containing 10 questions related to department renaming and rebranding</td>
<td>Tables 1, 3 Figures 2, 3, 4, 5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: AAG = American Association of Geographers.
Most troubling was the large number of departments dropping the word geography entirely. This group included departments that adopted new names such as “earth and environment” and departments where geography was originally part of a multisubject name that consolidated to a shorter name (e.g., “history, geography, and political science” becoming “social studies”). Interestingly, despite the increasing popularity of degree programs focused on geospatial sciences, geomatics, and geoanalytics, few departments (n = 6) implemented changes to include “geographic information systems” or “GIS” in their name. Three departments adopted “geospatial” in their new name, but it is not obvious whether this new term is a STEM-related change or a variant of GIS. Although we chose the former because the term is usually paired with the word science, further discussion on this topic across the discipline might be warranted. On a positive note, five departments dropped additional subjects from their name to become just “geography.”

In addition to tracing name change trajectories, we were interested in determining when changes were implemented. Forty-two survey respondents reported the year their name change took place, with a large proportion (48 percent) of those changes occurring since 2010 (Figure 2). As the median year for changes, interestingly 2008 falls at the midpoint of the Great Recession, which lasted from December 2007 to June 2009. Because mergers are one potential outcome of budget cuts, we analyzed the fifteen departments where a name change resulted from a merger (Question 5) and found that nine of those changes (60 percent) occurred since 2008. This might suggest a link between the Great Recession and renaming via mergers. In some cases, changes were explained by write-in comments noting the implementation of a merger as being “a dean’s decision” or “due to budget cuts.” Interestingly, the number of name changes reported between 2010 and 2014 is equivalent to the previous two decades combined. Because many departments did not respond to the survey, it is possible this number is even higher.

Our second research question was aimed at uncovering motivations and rationale behind renaming and rebranding. We asked respondents to check all applicable answers from a list containing possible reasons (Figure 3). The most common responses were to enhance on-campus standing (43 percent), attract more undergraduate majors (38 percent), merge with another department or program (30 percent), and address changing faculty interests (23 percent). Interestingly, more than half the respondents selected “other” either in addition to selecting provided responses or as their only response to the question. Respondents were given the opportunity to write in a response if no item on the list captured the underlying motivation or reason behind the name change. A selection of responses has been compiled in Table 3, with many responses suggesting that the decision to rename was tied to changes within geography itself or to trends in majors or courses being offered within the department.

Along with uncovering the underlying rationale, we sought to learn about other initiatives taking place
within departments that responded to our survey. Approximately half of the respondents (49 percent) indicated that their department’s change was accompanied by the addition of new degree programs (Figure 4), with twenty-three new BA or BS degrees added by the forty-seven surveyed departments. Nine of those (almost 40 percent) identified an environmental focus (e.g., environmental studies, environmental science, etc.). Fewer graduate degrees were added compared to the undergraduate level. Although seven new MA or MS degrees were added, along with three new PhD programs, only one of the new graduate degrees was environmentally focused (i.e., MS in environmental sustainability). A notable trend is the addition of GIS-related degrees or concentrations at the bachelor’s and master’s levels, with three departments adding a BS in GIS and one department adding an MS degree in GIS management. The majority of these GIS-related degrees have been added since 2009. It should be noted that some of the new degrees replaced long-standing degrees in geography, with one respondent providing clarification that “new” programs were simply rearrangements of existing degrees to conform to an environmental focus. A few respondents noted that the addition of environmental degrees has diverted students away from geography degrees.

Our final set of questions examined respondents’ perceptions about positive impacts and negative consequences associated with their name change. Responses were overwhelmingly positive with respect to the impacts of name changes on their department and, more broadly, on the discipline of geography (Figure 5). The most favorable impacts were perceived to be associated with undergraduate recruiting, on- and off-campus prestige, course enrollment, and new faculty recruiting. Perceived positive impacts were not as strong when respondents were asked about the impact of the name change on geography as a

### Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Selected “other” write-in responses</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Budgetary</td>
<td>“Cost-saving to combine departments”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administrative</td>
<td>“Dean’s decision”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“At the request of administration in order to secure more faculty lines”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Significant reorganization of college structure”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changing field</td>
<td>“To align with naming practices of other departments in our discipline”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“To address changes in the field”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changing department</td>
<td>“In recognition of a new academic major” (several similar responses)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“To clarify we administer an environmental studies program” (several similar responses)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“To reflect the range of degree programs we offer” (several similar responses)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Indicating we are a STEM department”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“More accurately reflect program goals”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“To create a tighter bond between Geography and Geology” (several similar responses)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Merger encouraged “to ensure vitality of another department”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>To “fit better within the school”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“To acknowledge we have both human and physical scientists”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: STEM = science, technology, engineering, and mathematics.

![Figure 4](https://example.com/figure4.png)  
New degree programs that accompanied department name changes. (Color figure available online.)
discipline. No negative consequences were identified for student employment, research or teaching assistantships, or competitiveness for extramural funding. Nearly 14 percent of respondents reported that their name change negatively impacted recruiting undergraduate students into geography, however.

Because mergers might suggest a different motivation behind rebranding (e.g., administrative mandate instead of department initiative), we examined responses from the fifteen departments where a name change was due to merger. Although we found no major differences between the merged and nonmerged departments in terms of perceptions about changes, negative impacts were mentioned for alumni relations, department prestige, and faculty retention more often among the merged departments. In contrast, nonmerged departments noted topics such as budget, new faculty positions, and space more often as negative impacts tied to changes. It should be noted that several respondents indicated that the change was too recent to observe impacts, suggesting the need for follow-up studies.

**Discussion and Conclusions**

Efforts to rename or rebrand long-standing geography departments offer important clues about the health of geography as a discipline, and we sought to explore the rationale behind those efforts. For example, are renaming and rebranding efforts aimed at realigning geography programs with emphasis areas defined by Pattison (1964) or is the label geography inadequate for many twenty-first-century programs seeking to become broader, more focused, or more closely affiliated with new or emerging academic fields? For our first line of inquiry, we found that name changes have indeed been implemented to broaden “turf,” or the intellectual body of knowledge consistent with one or more of Pattison’s geography traditions. This is evidenced by the large number of departments that added subjects to an existing department name. Frequent additions were “environment,” “global studies,” “GIS,” or “earth science.” These subjects align with Pattison’s (1964) man–land, area/regional, spatial traditions, and earth-science, respectively. In addition, an emphasis on the environment in revised names and new degree programs suggests a desire to affiliate geography with global issues that have received recent attention such as climate change and sustainability. In fact, two departments and two new degree programs added the word *sustainability*. For some, the inclusion of sustainability might be viewed as a natural extension of geography’s man–land or human–environment emphases. Departments adopting a new environmental focus are typically located at colleges and universities without an explicit department emphasizing the environment (see Table 3).

Although a majority of name changes involved modifications such as expanded names, a few departments dropped “geography” altogether. From our survey and supplemental information, we were able to determine that most of these eliminations took place as a result of departmental mergers or administrative restructuring rather than as part of a rebranding effort. Also noteworthy was that none of our
respondents suggested that the decision was driven by a perception of geography as old fashioned, outdated, or obscure, although one respondent noted the term land studies as being “archaic.”

Our findings reveal that efforts to rename and rebrand have remained, for the most part, within the loose confines of Pattison’s (1964) four traditional pillars of geography, and rebranding efforts have been aimed at showcasing the expanded boundaries of knowledge or academic turf associated with a department’s academic programs or research strengths. Although there appear to be no significant departures from Pattison’s pillars, there is evidence that developing fields of study (e.g., environment and sustainability) are increasingly being integrated within geography’s body of knowledge and within academic department names. The inclusion of environmental and sustainability degrees and programs featuring new department names might be a nod toward what Haigh and Freeman (1982) described as geography’s “animalistic instinct for survival” (187).

We also explored forces potentially driving name changes such as a need to expand undergraduate majors, attract graduate students, or recruit faculty with an eye to motivations unique to geography. Broadly speaking, we found that the most common reasons for undertaking a name change were to attract undergraduate majors and to enhance a department’s prestige on campus. Interestingly, but not surprisingly, both of these factors might be of critical importance in competing for on-campus funding or other resources. As previously noted, the large number of “other” responses received in response to our questions about motives underlying a name change suggests that the impetus behind rebranding might not correspond to reasons that have driven name changes in other disciplines. Although we structured the list of possible choices following other studies and findings across several academic fields (see Bare 1980; Morris 2002; Mallon, Biebuyck, and Jones 2003; Mills et al. 2005; Crouse, Colgate, and Gaudet 2007), our list failed to capture many of the reasons underlying rebranding efforts in the departments surveyed. Nearly 50 percent of respondents provided an open-ended response to “other” on our survey, with many providing only a write-in response to this question. Furthermore, the tenor of “other” responses reveals that many name changes have been implemented in an attempt to broaden public perception of what geography is and what geographers do, supporting observations by Dawson and Hebden (1984), who argued that the public face of geography is of utmost concern to the discipline’s long-term survival. Several respondents indicated that a name change was implemented as a way of recognizing the addition of a new academic major. This suggests that departments are taking actions to absorb new subjects perceived as falling within their domain such as environmental studies.

Along with benefits, there are negative aspects and unintended consequences associated with rebranding efforts. When asked about the impacts of name and programmatic changes on the discipline of geography, several respondents expressed a belief that their name change somewhat negatively affects geography in terms of undergraduate student recruiting. Although we did not specifically ask respondents to elaborate on this response, the trend toward adding environmentally focused degrees, programs, and concentrations might draw potential majors away from pursuing geography in favor of other disciplinary options. In many cases, the new degrees offered do not have the word geography in their name, a clear setback for geographers and geography. Oddly, this same category (undergraduate student recruitment) was also where respondents perceived the most positive gains for geography, a dichotomy suggesting that although the addition of new subjects and degrees might draw attention away from the discipline of geography, it could be simultaneously drawing students into the department, where they are likely being exposed to what geography is and what geographers do.

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Literature Cited


